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Census results forcing shift in Contra Costa County supervisorial district boundaries

By Lisa Vorderbrueggen
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Contra Costa's eastern and San Ramon Valley supervisorial districts must shrink, while their three counterparts in the western and central portions of the county must expand.

The shifts were revealed in a Times mapping analysis of 2010 census data released this month and confirmed by county officials.

After every decennial census, elected boards must redraw their political district boundaries to attain equal population under the "one vote, one person" clause in the U.S. Constitution.

California voters awarded the job of redistricting congressional and state legislative boundaries to an independent, 14-member commission.

In counties, regional agencies such as BART and cities that elect their city council members by voting districts, however, the task remains firmly in the elected officials' hands.

Significant population shifts, such as those experienced in Contra Costa County in the past decade, will trigger boundary changes that historically have generated territorial conflicts among communities and elected officials.

The majority of the 100,209 new residents to call Contra Costa home in the past decade live in the faster-growing San Ramon Valley and the eastern communities of Brentwood and Oakley.

As a result, Districts 3 and 5 -- held respectively by Supervisor Mary Nejedly Piepho, of Discovery Bay, and Federal Glover, of Pittsburg -- are overpopulated.

Piepho's district stretches from her hometown into

Knightsen, Brentwood and Byron before it turns west to encompass San Ramon, Danville, Alamo and portions of Walnut Creek. Glover's territory spans the top of the county from Bay Point to Pittsburg, Antioch, Oakley and Bethel Island.

Piepho's district population ballooned 32.5 percent in the past decade, while Glover's grew 13.6 percent. In contrast, the other three districts grew at rates of 1 to 3 percent.

Contra Costa's new supervisorial districts must have about 209,805 residents apiece. That equals the county's 2010 population divided by five.

Drawing political boundaries is a balancing act between keeping cities together, respecting minority populations, recognizing communities of interest such as school districts and reflecting geographical barriers.

A supervisor's home address is key.

Barring a major schism, the board is unlikely to outright force a member out of his or own district. Supervisors must live in their districts; in the event of a change, they would remain in office until the next election.

Party registration matters, as well.

Supervisors are nonpartisan officeholders, but party affiliations matter when it comes to raising money and volunteers for re-election campaigns. A

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Democratic supervisor, for example, will fight a boundary shift into a strong Republican area.

It takes only three votes to adopt new boundaries, which means a majority could impose undesirable changes on an unhappy minority.

It has happened before.

In 2001, then-Supervisor Donna Gerber's colleagues overruled her vigorous objections to a newly drawn district -- now held by Piepho -- that stripped her of her Walnut Creek political base and forced her eastward into Discovery Bay.

"We could draw a supervisor out of his or her district, but I hope we don't get to that," said board Chairwoman Gayle Uilkema, of Lafayette. "These are stressful times, and we have to work together. If we start playing games like that, it could destroy the cooperative spirit."

Any number of map iterations could surface this year, but among the likely points of conflict:

- Piepho wants all of Walnut Creek restored to her district. The city was split among three supervisors in 2001, but she needs to lose 46,682 people, more than any other district.
- Glover wants to keep Pittsburg and Bay Point in his district, his westernmost cities, but he needs to lose 16,341 people. He could give up portions of Antioch or Oakley, but that would force Piepho westward when she would prefer to expand into Walnut Creek.
- Uilkema, the District 2 supervisor, wants to keep Rossmoor, an affluent and elderly community in Walnut Creek. In fact, she must gain 21,220 people.
- Karen Mitchoff, of Pleasant Hill, the District 4 supervisor, sits dead center between two districts that must shrink and two that must expand. She wants to keep Concord intact, while some suggest that as the county's largest city, it should split. Her district must gain 22,151 people.
- John Gioia, of Richmond, the District 1 supervisor, is the county's westernmost district and needs to gain 19,652 people. All of his new territory must come from Uilkema's district, his only supervisorial neighbor. Unless the board wants to stretch District 1 into Orinda, following the pattern of the 14th Assembly District, his district is likely to move toward Pinole. Contra Costa County will

hold redistricting public hearings starting in May and adopt a final set of maps in late summer. For hearing dates, maps, information and an opportunity to sign up for email notifications, go to the county's redistricting

website,

Contact Lisa Vorderbrueggen at 925-945-4773, IBABuzz.com/politics or Twitter.com/lvorderbrueggen.



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